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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 SHENYANG 000153

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DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/CM, INR, DRL

E.O. 12958: DECL: AUGUST 8, 2032

TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [SOCI](#) [KCU](#) [L CH](#)

SUBJECT: THEY "WON'T LET THE PEOPLE SPEAK": PRESS CONTROL
IN NORTHEAST CHINA

Classified By: CONSUL GENERAL STEPHEN B. WICKMAN.
REASONS: 1.4(B), 1.4(D)

11. (C) SUMMARY: Conservative propaganda officials in northeast China continue to gag, muffle or otherwise "manage" perceived negative news, according to Liaoning journalists and Party sources, who note that media freedom generally tends to be more restricted here than in other parts of China. Propaganda authorities' recent "management" of news coverage of a karaoke parlor explosion near Benxi was only the latest example, though even some high-level Party officials have grumbled to us about the event's handling. The hand of the censorship apparatus appeared again even more recently as propaganda authorities managed an entire news blackout of an event implicating social stability, when thousands of transport workers launched a days-long strike in Jinzhou. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) An August 1 Washington Post expose on the "muffling" of news coverage of the July 4 explosion of a Liaoning karaoke parlor in Tianshifu, Benxi County, highlighted but one in a long line of news events subject to controls by propaganda officials in northeast China's Information Offices (see Edward Cody, "China's Local Censors Muffle an Explosion"). A range of Liaoning Chinese Communist Party (CCP) members, newspaper journalists and television reporters/officials in recent days discussed with us the nature of the Liaoning censorship apparatus and the media environment here more broadly.

THE CONSERVATIVE NORTHEAST AND ITS CENSORSHIP APPARATUS

13. (C) Post sources generally concur that northeast China remains a relatively conservative corner of the country in terms of media freedom. CHONG Lin (strictly protect), a close Post contact and Vice Director of the official Shenyang Daily's economic section told PAO on August 3 that propaganda officials she has encountered here have tended to be more strict on the media than in other parts of China. Her reporter-friends working elsewhere in China--especially in the south--have had comparatively more freedom to report on sensitive issues, she noted, conceding that the business-related focus of her work has allowed her more latitude than her other colleagues in town. Although the orthodoxy of propaganda officials varies by province, Chong stressed that the propaganda officials she has encountered in the northeast tend to be less tolerant and heterodox than those in the south, adding with a grimace that the Liaoning propaganda officials with whom she interacts are largely Party hacks that have no proper journalistic experience.

14. (C) The actual process of news "management" differs in practice between the television and the print media. TIAN Wei (strictly protect), Deputy Programming Director for official Liaoning Television, told PAO on August 2 that she needs to seek the guidance of propaganda authorities on all potentially sensitive stories. But she confided that she generally does not need to coordinate too closely with propaganda officials because she is already well aware of their views and guidelines. If a sensitive but newsworthy event occurs in another province, Tian said, then Liaoning TV's guidance is to take its cues--and any television feed--from the official television station of the province in question.

15. (C) Rules for the Liaoning print media tend to be somewhat more flexible than those for television journalists, Tian explained, a point echoed by others. Even so, editors at the official Liaoning Daily still consult with propaganda authorities "frequently" on their stories, says GAO Xin, one of the paper's news editors. Certain redlines are relatively clear. Asked on August 4 about a recent transport strike in Jinzhou (see below) Gao said she had not heard of it but was quick to add that the Liaoning Daily generally would not be permitted to cover labor unrest because the subject is "sensitive."

16. (C) Liaoning TV's Tian Wei stressed to us the well-known fact that news editors in many cases maintain close professional and personal ties with propaganda officials. According to a number of journalistic contacts, it is these personal connections that prove to be a more potent force in the process of censorship or (self-censorship) than Party membership among members of the press corps. Why? Chong Lin, for instance, estimates that at the Shenyang Daily--a publication controlled by the Party--only one-

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third of her colleagues are Party members. Numbers are even smaller, she said, at non-Party-controlled papers in Liaoning. But a sense of loyalty to the CCP is likely a more important element among Liaoning propaganda authorities, whom Chong noted tend--at least among those she has encountered--to be very loyal Party members.

THE CENSORSHIP APPARATUS AND ITS DISCONTENTS

17. (C) Not everyone has been pleased with the heavy-handedness of the propaganda authorities, and even relatively high-ranking Liaoning CCP officials have occasionally privately vented their frustration. On the Tianshifu explosion, for instance, Liaoning Party School Deputy Party Secretary WANG Hongsheng (strictly protect) confided on August 2 that he was quite "dissatisfied" with the guidelines from the propaganda authorities and the resulting press coverage. Wang had read the internal Party reports on the explosion and noted--unsurprisingly--that they differed substantially from the official Xinhua news accounts. The Party reports broached a wide range of issues, including possible guilty parties, victims and damage, inter alia. Motives are still unclear, Wang said, but revenge may have been at play. (NOTE: The Liaoning Public Security Bureau is still investigating the explosion, Benxi Foreign Affairs Office (FAO) Director GUAN Shizhen told the CG on August 3, promising no further details until the effort was completed. END NOTE.)

BLACKING OUT THE JINZHOU TRANSPORT STRIKE

18. (SBU) Apparently subject to even harsher controls than the Benxi explosion was a more recent event in Liaoning that involved an entire news blackout and, unlike Tianshifu, directly implicated questions of social stability. On July 18, several thousand transport workers in Jinzhou, a coastal city only recently revitalizing, launched a days-long strike to protest the impending privatization of the city's bus company and related

compensation issues. Buses lay idle for days as commuters bore the brunt of the strike, and the CG observed their conspicuous absence during a previously scheduled July 20-21 visit. Most workers resumed their duties less than a week after the strike began, following government efforts to manage the situation, though according to one online account, at least several hundred remained on strike nearly a week later.

¶9. (SBU) All the while, Liaoning authorities imposed a total news blackout, prohibiting domestic television and print media from reporting on the strike. (Some local reporters did make it to the scene, according to several online sources). The sole source of information on the Jinzhou strike proved to be local BBS sites, blogs and a handful of Chinese-language overseas web pages that primarily re-posted BBS messages from Jinzhou residents. BBS boards on July 18 initially buzzed with details, featuring sitreps and messages of support for the strikers. By July 19, however, the discourse had shifted to the alleged "malfeasance" of ZHAO Lihui, the state-owned municipal bus company's general manager, who the sources said stood to make a handsome profit. Netizens condemned Zhao's "gall" and accused her of embezzlement. One Jinzhou resident warned that Zhao had "underestimated the people's strength." Another exhorted readers to "wake up" and "use legal instruments to protect our legal rights." Watching all this activity online, Post observed the webmaster for one particular Jinzhou BBS--hosted on well-known web portal Sohu--quickly and systematically deleting any item that touched on the issue of possible corruption.

¶10. (SBU) Initially, the webmasters permitted discussion of the basic details about the strike and the government's actions to redress the grievances. The angry netizens, however, continued to broaden their attacks over the following days. By July 22, far more explicit attacks on Zhao and, ultimately, the government itself appeared before they were promptly removed. One Jinzhou resident grouched that the "government...won't let the people speak." Others decried the "excessive" censorship and "tyrannical," "unjust" deletion of their BBS posts.

¶11. (C) Privately, officials seemed far less sensitive about the strike than their media handling might suggest. After Jinzhou Party Secretary TONG Zhiwu glumly fielded strike-related phone calls on July 20 throughout a meeting with the CG, FAO Director TAN Yunpeng the following day

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openly confirmed the strike had been ongoing since July 18. Asked about its causes, Tan omitted the corruption angle but explained, accurately, that the transport workers feared losing their livelihoods during the privatization process. Similarly, in the aftermath of the Tianshifu explosion, officials in Benxi also did not shy away from discussing the event. Benxi Vice Mayor LIU Shangyang and FAO Director LU Enwei on July 11 openly told Econoff that while the event was frightening, they did not find it terribly significant.

COMMENT

¶12. (C) In the run-up to the 17th Party Congress, perhaps it is unsurprising for the official print and television news media in Liaoning to play it safe and project the image of a stable, healthy and "harmonious" Liaoning. This may be particularly important in light of Liaoning Party Secretary LI Keqiang's anticipated elevation to Beijing

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this fall, perhaps to a Politburo Standing Committee slot. And this may be one reason, in addition to the sensitivity of the topic, why so many of Post's journalistic sources in Liaoning--even longtime contacts--became noticeably nervous when asked about the mechanics of censorship in general and

the role of propaganda authorities in particular. During an August 3 meeting at the official Northeast China News Web, for instance, nervous journalists actually stopped the meeting, consulted outside for several minutes and, upon their return, referred us to the provincial Information Office for any further questions on censorship.

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